

Sunday, April 26, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Living Tenderly”

Earlier this month I had the opportunity to hear Interim Head of School Peter O’Neill address the Hotchkiss community.

He told a wonderful story that has stayed with me.

One day, while he was serving as head of K-12 school, he visited a kindergarten class.

The teacher introduced him to the children and asked them what they thought Mr. O’Neill’s job was.

One eager boy quickly responded that Mr. O’Neill was the boss of the school, the boss of the teachers, the boss of everybody.

Then a little girl raised her hand and said that she thought that Mr. O’Neill’s job was to take care of the school and all of the people in it.

Rather than a commentary on gender differences, this is offered as a lesson on leadership from a child’s perspective.

Today is identified as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’ in the church world.

We are introduced to the idea that Jesus is our good shepherd, leading us, guiding us, caring about our well-being.

This description was perhaps more relevant to the people of biblical times who lived as shepherds.

They knew what being a good shepherd entailed and they recognized how dependent their flocks were on them for their well-being.

Today, however, we are socialized to be independent, to watch out for ourselves, to find our own way.

We are more apt to celebrate the cowboy than the shepherd.

The one who uses power and force to achieve their goals is lauded while the tender motivator is often overlooked.

In our world, today, some people bristle at the idea of being herded – even metaphorically.

We want to believe that we don’t need anyone to tend to us.

We want to believe that we are individually capable of providing everything we need.

We are wrong.

We need other people and we need God.

The shepherd that Jesus describes is one that lives out God's love by accompanying the sheep everywhere they travel.

Down in the valley?

God is there.

Up on a mountain?

God is there.

When things get hard, God does not wander off.

God, our shepherd, stays with us, comforting us where we hurt, cheering us on, and bringing us back into community when we wander off.

There is no need for force – the gentle shepherd uses his voice to call to his followers.

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling.

Jesus humbly walked from town to town, inviting people to follow him.

And people followed!

In a TED talk presented a few years ago Derik Sivers touts the strength of what he calls the "First Follower" concept.

Mr. Sivers' premise is that leadership is over-rated and that it's the first follower who creates the leader.

If the leader has the wisdom to treat the first follower as an equal, he argues, then that follower will stay and join in a particular movement.

The first follower legitimizes the leader in his or her efforts, transforming the "lone nut" into a leader!

Once the first follower is fully engaged and embraced by the leader then others are encouraged and free to enter into the movement with confidence and trust.

Conversely, the movement dies if no one follows.

What if no one had taken up Jesus' invitation to follow?

Jesus made it very clear he was not looking for leaders but rather followers.

He invited people into a way of life.

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling "O Sinner, come home."

He was the leader.

He is the leader.

We are the followers.

My responsibility to you as your pastor is not to model Christ-like leadership but to be a living example of a first follower.

My life, our lives, must be centered on following the good shepherd into lives of kindness, gentleness and care.

Another lesson from today's reading, which is often overlooked is Jesus' testimony to the shepherd's willingness to 'lay down his life for the sheep.'

In this post Easter season we are reminded that resurrection offers us new life – over and over again.

The shepherd can only lay down his mortal life once for the flock – but a resurrected shepherd can offer new life over and over again.

One author described this as “the call to recognize that resurrection life is not just a gift for personal blessing, but is a powerful energy that is intended to flow between people, bringing life, wholeness, and justice wherever it flows.

The resurrection life we celebrate during this Easter season is meant to connect us with others and motivate us to seek their best, contributing in whatever way we can to a world of grace, peace, justice and love.”

Resurrection is not about something that happens after death.

Resurrection is a way of living, a way of life.

“Resurrection is a challenge to everything that brings death into our world, and a call for all people to live differently – in ways that bring life to others.”

This is an attitude that we can adopt in our lives today.

We can choose to be life-givers.

Bringing life to others takes on many different forms.

The shepherd of scripture brings life by leading the sheep through the narrow gate to a place of peace and tranquility.

The shepherd of scripture is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

The shepherd of scripture promises that if we love one another, as we have been loved, if we abide in God, God will abide in us.

These lessons endure.

Today, as we convene our 270th annual meeting we must be cognizant of those who came before us.

As we celebrate those who tenderly shepherded this congregation for the past 270 years, we acknowledge the temporary nature of our existence.

Our responsibility, our calling, is to steward this church – for our time – into a future that will ensure a sacred place of stillness, tranquility, peacefulness and holiness for those who come after us.

Going back to Mr. O'Neill's kindergartners – Jesus is calling us to follow – to take care of the sheep of his flock.

Let's pray for the ability to do so with grace.

Amen.